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What's gender solidarity got to do with it? Woman shaming and Hillary Clinton

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa

University of Wollongong, sharoncd@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

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What's gender solidarity got to do with it? Woman shaming and Hillary Clinton

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Hillary Clinton: she has been shamed by women as every kind of bad feminist. Brian Snyder/Reuters

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Author



Donald Trump body-shamed and slut-shamed former Miss Universe, Alicia Machado, by drawing attention to her weight and an alleged “sex tape”, sparking a shower of feminist protest. Hillary Clinton has been shamed by everyone and anyone for being both womanly and unwomanly as she stood by her man during his countless sexual scandals.

Attempting to smear political opponents is hardly a new thing. Politicians are renowned for engaging in dirty wars. What is notable about the smearing in this campaign, however, is that a lot of it is being done by women – many of them feminists. Women across the nation – across the globe – are shaming Hillary and each other. It seems the feminist community is imploding.

Women have shamed Clinton as every form of bad feminist. “Her entire record suggests she is bad news for women,” says journalist Liza Featherstone in her essay collection, *False Choices: The Faux Feminism of Hillary Rodham Clinton*.

She is a bad pacifist feminist. Actress Susan Sarandon argues that war is catastrophic for women and, as secretary of state, Clinton audaciously supported interventionist policies on the grounds that they could liberate women.

She is a bad intersectionalist feminist. Academic and activist, Yasmin Nair, declares that Clinton’s policies serve only middle-and upper-class white women.

Perhaps even more damningly for a proclaimed feminist, she is a sexist wife who joined in the slut-shaming of Monica Lewinsky after her affair with Bill, which for Lewinsky confirmed Hillary’s anti-feminist propensity to “blame the woman”.

Ordinary women voters have also been targets of vote-shaming by other women. Second Wave feminist icon, Gloria Steinem, smeared young women voters who championed Bernie Sanders over Hillary Clinton as frivolous, boy-chasing girls.



Susan Sarandon. Gary Cameron/Reuters

Former secretary of state, Madeleine Albright meanwhile, told women who supported Sanders that there was

a special place in hell for women who don't help each other.

Shame and the political woman

Women shaming women in the political arena is not isolated to this extraordinary election campaign. It has a long history as a gendered political tool. The early women’s rights movements – those aimed



Sharon Crozier-De Rosa

Senior Lecturer in History, University of Wollongong

at securing the female vote in the first place – were characterised by woman shaming.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, women like phenomenally popular British celebrity novelist Marie Corelli, attacked their political sisters as gender abominations – as creatures of “no sex” – ugly, unwomanly spinsters who only wanted the vote because they couldn’t find husbands.



An anti suffragette postcard circa 1909.
Wikimedia Commons

There was also inter-feminist shaming. In the early 20th century, militant feminists across Britain and the US shamed their more conservative sisters for being slaves to patriarchal notions of respectability. Constitutional suffragists shamed their more radical sisters for their unwomanly lack of decorum. Racial shaming also prevailed in the 1860s and 1870s, after the Civil War, as African American feminists called out those white feminists who refused to support moves to give black men the vote.

In all of these cases, shame was invoked in an attempt to protect the existence of a community of shared values. Shame is an intensely social emotion. Despite its increasingly negative reputation, many continue to believe that a healthy dose of shame has the power to inspire political action for the good of the community.

Shame works on people's fears of being judged and found defective. If people value their connection to a particular group, they will hesitate from doing or saying things that might risk their exclusion from that group.

Shame is a highly gendered emotion. Historically, it has been used to police notions of femininity. Women participating in the intensely visible, public world of politics – a world that was once exclusively masculine – draw attention to their gender transgressions.

The one woman to rule them all

What has become apparent during Hillary Clinton's campaign is the ripe division between older and younger American feminists. Feminism – in the US and elsewhere – has never been homogenous. Race, class and political tactics have always divided the movement.

But now there is a category that bundles up many of these divisions: Intersectionality. Intersectional feminism draws attention to the many overlapping layers of oppression that women might experience, for example, on the grounds of gender, race, class and/or sexuality.



The younger generation of feminists today, who often identify as intersectional feminists, argue that the Second Wave feminists of the Women's Liberation era concentrated solely on gender oppression; on the Woman. This single focus is now outdated. "Woman" as a category of oppression can be joined or trumped by others like race and sexuality.



Jay Morrison/flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

Still, ageing Second Wave feminists today call for unity over diversity as they draw nearer to realising one of their ambitions, namely, a woman in the highest political position in the state.

Representatives of each cohort attempt to shame the other into accepting viewpoints they hold to be critical.

So, does all this feminist in-fighting demonstrate that gender solidarity does not trump all, as many have triumphantly claimed? No, I think it confirms the opposite.

This woman shaming reveals – as it has since the earliest women's rights movements – that the issue of gender solidarity is at the heart of the matter. Much of this shaming of women voters and women candidates, such as Clinton, is not about denying the notion of gender solidarity. Rather, it is about women attempting to construct a relevant and workable model of 21st century feminism. It is about women trying to reach a consensus about what a female president should look and sound like.

Doubtless, if American women had had 44 female presidents to represent them they would not need this one woman – Hillary Clinton – to embody all facets of what has always been a highly diverse and fractured community of feminist womanhood.

Whatever we think about the desirability of feminist shaming, one good thing that has resulted from this campaign is the passionate body of debate centred on 21st century feminist values.



Feminism Hillary Clinton second-wave feminism US election